



*Setting the*

# FOUNDATION

A Report on  
Elementary Grades  
Reading in Tennessee



In my classroom, I read aloud to my students every single day. There seem to be more and more things that require my time and attention, and fewer and fewer snippets of time to stop and read, but read aloud time is too precious to lose. At the end of each day, we pack up about ten minutes early, turn out the lights, the students put their heads down, and we share rich reading experiences from authors such as Kate DiCamillo, E.B. White, Roald Dahl, and Beverly Cleary. Because many of my students come from poverty, this time spent with text that is above their reading level is invaluable; they're exposed to the rich vocabulary, poetic cadences, and timeless lessons that come from the best of children's literature, and they have the skill set of a mature reader to help them navigate the language.



**Catherine Whitehead**

Third grade, Chester County

2015-16 Tennessee Teacher of the Year

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This report was written by the Tennessee Department of Education’s Office of Research and Strategy and designed by Brad Walker.

# Executive Summary

**By any measure, too many children in Tennessee struggle to read.**

We hear this from teachers who try to cover rigorous standards only to find that their students lack the skills and knowledge necessary to genuinely engage with classroom texts. We see it on our state test scores, which have improved in all subjects over the past several years except grades 3 through 6 English language arts. We see it on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), where only one-third of Tennessee fourth graders receive a proficient reading score.

By reading, we mean more than just decoding the letters on a page—although that is critically important. We want readers who draw meaning from text and make connections to the outside world. These are the critical thinking skills that determine success both in and outside the classroom. In past years, far too many of our students have passed through elementary school without acquiring this strong foundation—strong decoding skills coupled with deep comprehension—and have been met with escalating challenges as they move from grade to grade.

This report incorporates a series of studies and data analyses conducted over the past year by and for the Tennessee Department of Education to understand the challenges we face.

The good news: Our classrooms are increasingly set up for success. Districts and schools in Tennessee have made reading a central priority—often, the central priority—in their daily schedules, their student placement decisions, and their teachers’ professional development. Across classrooms, we find committed and knowledgeable educators who are pushing students forward. Yet each year, despite our collective efforts, at least half of our students complete third grade without becoming readers.

## What will it take to change this cycle?

**First, we must ensure students don’t fall behind during early elementary school.** This means supporting our teachers’ ability to provide literacy instruction that pushes students to think more deeply, connect ideas and skills together, and interact with the text in more complex ways. Explicit training and practice begins with aspiring teachers during preparation programs and should extend to all teachers throughout their time in the classroom.

**Second, we must improve at helping those students who are struggling.** Currently, students who perform far below grade level in the early grades rarely regain their footing. We need stronger intervention strategies that take on both the academic and non-academic obstacles to student success.

To get from here to there, we provide four recommendations tied to new state initiatives that we hope will prove critical in building more readers across Tennessee and reaching our Read to be Ready goal of 75 percent of third graders proficient by 2025. ♦

# By any measure, too many children in Tennessee **struggle to read.**

**Goal:** 75% of Tennessee third graders will be proficient in reading by 2025.

## How will we do it?

1. Support deeper literacy instruction to ensure that students learn decoding within the context of broader comprehension.
2. Increase schools' and teachers' ability to differentiate instruction in the early grades and to target students' academic and non-academic needs as early as possible.
3. Improve RTI<sup>2</sup> implementation for students who need greater support in specific skill areas.
4. Get better at getting better.

# The State of the State in K–5 Reading

**Tennessee has made tremendous gains in student performance over the past decade.**

For the first time since the U.S. Department of Education began administering the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) to compare achievement across state lines, Tennessee performance has risen to a level where the goal of becoming one of the top 25 states in the nation is within reach.

Yet elementary reading remains a challenge. While we see some bright spots in individual districts, our statewide test results place us far behind our level of expectation for students in Tennessee.

## Most Students Below Grade Level

Student results on the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP) have improved in all subjects over the past several years except grades 3 through 6 English language arts (ELA). Statewide, ELA scores in these grades have remained steady or declined. Indeed, ELA is the only TCAP subject where less than half of students earn a proficient score, with 43 percent of Tennessee third graders and 45 percent of Tennessee fourth graders performing on grade level by the end of the year.

NAEP—also known as the Nation’s Report Card—offers an even more dire assessment of student achievement in elementary ELA. According to NAEP standards, one-third, or 33 percent, of Tennessee students demonstrated proficiency on the fourth grade reading assessment in 2015—an unacceptable outcome in a state that prides itself on being the fastest improving in the nation.

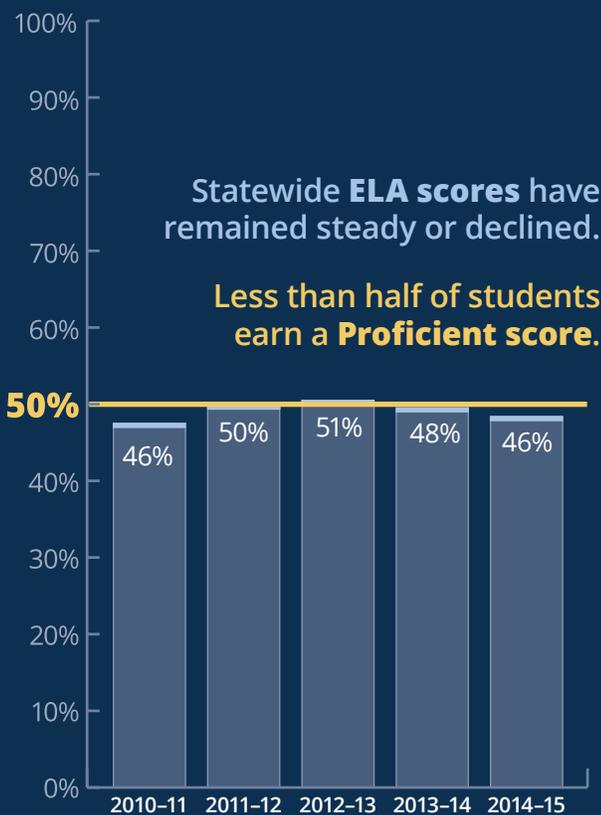
Regardless of the measure, more than half of our students cannot understand what they read at the end of fourth grade. Our failure to help them become proficient in reading means they will fall behind in every subsequent grade.

## Large Achievement Gaps

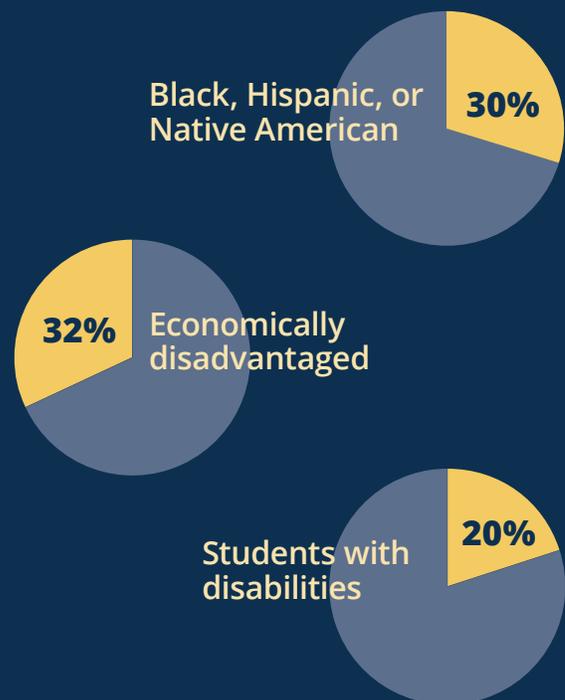
While reading achievement in Tennessee is relatively low for most students, a closer look at the numbers shows

striking disparities. The state’s largest achievement gaps in grades 3–8 show up in English language arts, with historically disadvantaged student groups far less likely than their peers to perform at grade level, even in third grade. Nearly two-thirds of non-economically disadvantaged students are proficient by the end of third grade, but just one-third of economically disadvantaged students reach proficiency. Slightly below one-third of minority students are at grade level, and only one in five students with disabilities achieve proficiency by the end of third grade, a statistic that is particularly striking given that the majority of students with disabilities in Tennessee have non-cognitive impairments such as specific learning disabilities or speech language impairments.

These gaps are even more problematic given what we know about student trends over time. Tennessee data demonstrates that the students who are far behind by the end of the third grade rarely make up that ground over the next several years. In 2013, almost 6,000 Tennessee students earned a score classification of below basic—the lowest of the four classifications (below basic, basic, proficient, advanced)—on the third grade ELA test. Only one-third of the below basic students improved to a basic level on their fifth grade assessment, and less than three percent—only 142 students of the original 6,000—met grade level expectations by attaining proficiency by fifth grade. Too many kids will slip through the cracks if we cannot close these gaps and help them catch up.



## Proficiency Rates in Third Grade



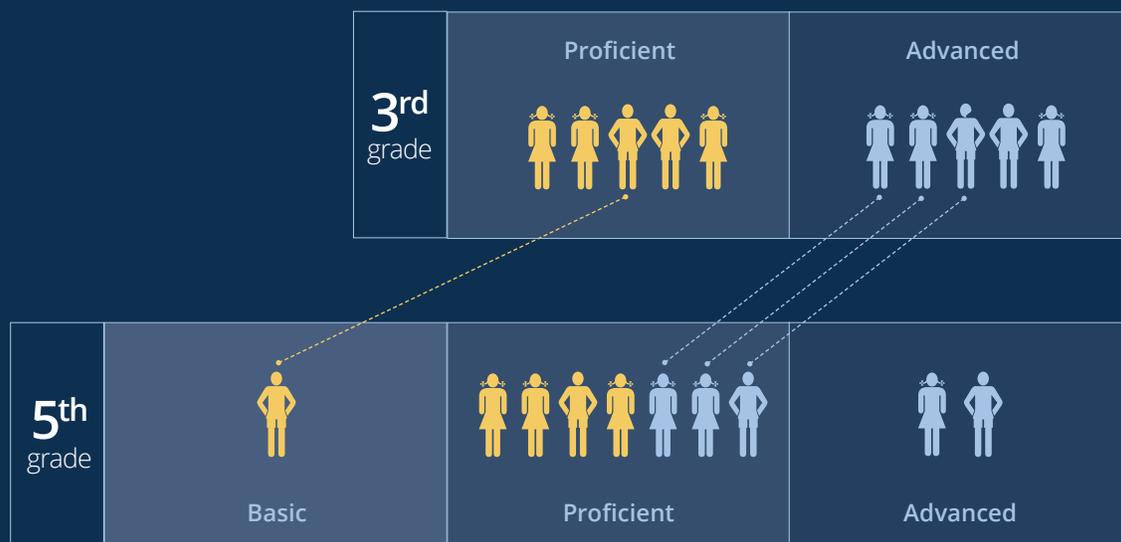
## Insufficient Foundations

State test results also provide evidence that too many of our students who look prepared when they sit for the third grade assessment fail to sustain this level of performance when they encounter more rigorous academic demands in the later grades. One out of five students who earned a proficient score in third grade ELA in 2013 dropped down to basic by the fifth grade and more than half of the advanced third graders no longer received an advanced score in fifth grade. In contrast, only 15 percent of third grade math students dropped from proficient to basic and 20 percent dropped from advanced to proficient.

These trends suggest the possibility—further explored in the following sections—that the reading instruction that students are receiving in early elementary is not sufficient to carry them into the later grades where rich vocabulary, a broad base of knowledge, and critical thinking skills become ever more crucial. As the state transitions this year to a new and more complex, authentic assessment—TNReady—the state, districts, and teachers will have more in-depth and reliable data to identify students’ strengths and areas of need.

**More than half** of the advanced third graders no longer received an advanced score in fifth grade.

**One out of five** students who earned a proficient score in third grade ELA in 2013 dropped down to basic by the fifth grade.



## Long-Term Consequences

Data from Tennessee and across the nation demonstrates the importance of early reading success toward later life milestones. Unless we produce more readers, we will not be able to produce more students prepared to succeed in postsecondary. Among those students who reached eighth grade still performing below grade level in reading, only eight percent met the college-readiness benchmark on the ACT reading test.

A high school diploma alone does not adequately prepare students to succeed in the modern economy. In the high school graduating class of 2012, those who entered directly into the workforce without enrolling in a postsecondary institution earned an average annual salary of only \$9,161 in their first full year of employment. This amount falls far below the federal poverty line for a household of one and is insufficient to support a family without reliance on state-based aid programs. Our efforts to improve literacy are necessary to improve postsecondary preparedness to achieve economic success for all Tennessee students.

In Tennessee, we want to develop lifelong thinkers and learners. We want students who continue to engage in what they are learning, who become interested in discovering more about the world around them, and who are equipped to pursue a variety of passions in a range of fields. Failing to build a foundation for our students to be skilled critical thinkers limits their ability to continue to learn and grow throughout their lives. ♦



Among eighth graders reading below grade level,

**only 8%**

were deemed **college-ready**.



**Annual salary**

of 2012 high school graduates who did not enroll in any postsecondary institution:

**\$9,161**

Failing to build a **foundation** for our students to be skilled critical thinkers limits their ability to continue to learn and grow throughout their lives.

# What is Reading?

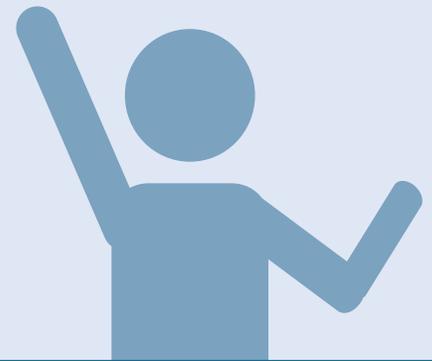
**The way we define reading affects the way we teach.**

Reading tends to be understood as the act of looking at a string of letters in a written text and translating or decoding these letters into sound. If a child can turn the letters *c-a-t* into cat, he or she knows how to read. This narrow view of reading misses the extent to which an individual's ability to interact with the words on a page demands engagement with a text's meaning as well as its individual words.

Following the lead of literacy experts across the country, we define reading in this report as a broader process that, even for the youngest of students, includes not only decoding but also comprehending and thinking critically about text.<sup>2</sup>

We hear this broader definition of reading in a description given by a second grade teacher of the challenges two of her students faced as they progressed through the school year:

**Shawn** was highly skilled at deciphering the words on a page. Tests of his ability to blend letter sounds into words and recognize complex spelling patterns placed him on par with fourth grade students. Yet Shawn struggled with comprehension. He routinely failed to derive meaning from the sentences he decoded, and his ability to fly through reading material rarely translated into broader or deeper learning. As the year continued, Shawn's weak comprehension base left him struggling with any task that required more than word recognition.



**Gerald** lacked basic reading fluency, with reading screeners placing his abilities at an early first-grade level. Yet when he had help decoding letters on the page, Gerald brought a deep engagement with the text's meaning and a wide range of comprehension strategies, such as the ability to compare multiple versions of a story. This allowed him to draw useful information from the text. These abilities created a very different arc of progress throughout the year. As targeted interventions addressed Gerald's skill deficits, he was able to excel across subject areas.<sup>3</sup>



# Later reading comprehension and academic success depend mostly on strong knowledge-based competencies.

One way that literacy experts have characterized Shawn and Gerald’s different instructional needs is by distinguishing between *skills-based reading competencies* and *knowledge-based reading competencies*.<sup>4</sup> Skills-based competencies include many of the competencies traditionally looked to for reading success: alphabet knowledge, fluency, and word reading. Knowledge-based competencies are about comprehension or making meaning. They focus on the ability to understand and express complex ideas through knowledge of concepts, vocabulary, and reasoning.

The key insight is that both skills- and knowledge-based competencies are vitally important, and neither

serves as the foundation for the other. **“Skills-based competencies are necessary but not sufficient for early literacy development; later reading comprehension and academic success depend mostly on strong knowledge-based competencies,”** a report from Harvard University researchers concludes.<sup>5</sup>

In the following pages, we dig more deeply into what we know about Tennessee students’ competencies and the classroom instruction our students receive. We argue that the evidence suggests that our statewide efforts to provide students with skill and knowledge-based competencies—our efforts to produce decoders who are simultaneously thinkers—have been insufficient. As a result, Tennessee students rarely leave elementary school with both Shawn’s strength in decoding and Gerald’s broader comprehension. Without laying a stronger foundation of skills and knowledge in the early grades, our state will not achieve its broader goal to set students on a path for long-term success. ♦

## SKILLS-BASED COMPETENCIES

The ability to hear and work with spoken sounds

concepts about print

word reading

alphabet knowledge

fluency

spelling

## KNOWLEDGE-BASED COMPETENCIES

The ability to understand and express complex ideas

oral language skills

vocabulary

concepts about the world

### A Note on "The Reading Wars"

These ideas build on years of “reading wars” between literacy experts, where phonics purists and whole language advocates debated whether reading should be approached as learning phonemes or sounds and then matching these to spelling patterns (phonics) or as an emerging ability that comes from lots of reading with a focus on sight words and making meaning (whole language). At some point during the reading wars, the philosophy of balanced literacy was coined. Balanced literacy, while described and implemented in a variety of ways, focuses primarily on the five components of reading—phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. For purposes of the work in Tennessee, we are not fully prescribing to either of these often polarizing and ill-defined “camps,” but will focus on skills- and knowledge-based competencies in reading with particular emphasis on reading that leads to greater depth, understanding, and critical thinking.

## A Tale of Two Classrooms

### *Same Focus, Different Approach*

**P**icture a first grade classroom at the start of the reading block. Students are gathered in front of the teacher who is quickly cycling through cards with the initial consonant digraphs /sl/, /sn/, and /st/ written on them. As the teacher displays each card, students practice making the sounds. After just a minute or two of practice, the teacher starts dropping off materials at small group workstations around the room and says, “Today, for reading, we will be working in centers.” The teacher reminds students of the different center activities and of the rotation schedule and dismisses students to their assigned spots, setting a timer for fifteen minutes. One student settles at a desk situated in the back corner of the room. She slides her fingers into the red plastic holes of a pair of scissors and begins cutting out words from a worksheet. Soon, she is staring down at 18 strips of paper, each one containing a word that starts with either /sl/, /sn/, or /st/. “Those look the same,” she mutters as she begins grouping words that begin with the same initial consonant digraph together. The student does not attempt to decode the words, but rather sorts based on visual appearance. As the 15-minute timer rings, the teacher calls out, “Move to your next center, please!” The student shoots up from her seat and heads to a rectangular table in the back of the room. Looking at a different worksheet with another 18 words, she grabs three different colored highlighters and begins coding words based on the visual appearance of the initial letters in the words. When the teacher who has been circulating among the stations arrives at the rectangular table, the student proudly waves her paper full of yellow, orange, and green marks in the air. “Good job!” the teacher says, quickly scanning to ensure that words had been sorted correctly. Just then, the timer buzzes sounding the end of the second center rotation and the literacy lesson for that day.

Now imagine another active first grade classroom at the start of the reading block. But, instead of sending students moving quickly into centers, the teacher calls students over to a large, multi-colored rug. The teacher raises the first card in a stack of cards and shows it to the group. She places her tongue under the roof her mouth and makes the sound “/sl/.” Immediately after she finishes, the students all chirp “/sl/” in unison. The teacher repeats this activity for two other initial consonant digraphs, /sn/ and /st/. Next, the teacher places the “/sl/” card next to a “/ip/” card on a blue pocket chart. As the teacher points, the students read each card, “/sl/” and then “/ip/.” Then, they blend the sounds together to form the word—“/sl-/ip/, slip.” Next, the teacher shows a picture of a man slipping on ice to illustrate the meaning of the word, uses “slip” in a sentence, and asks, “Who can use ‘slip’ in a sentence?” The teacher repeats this same process for the initial consonant digraphs /sn/ and /st/.

After about 10 minutes of forming words and creating sentences, the teacher directs students to move into centers. One student sits down at a small table, snatches a stack of flash cards, turns to another student, and asks, “Will you be my partner?” For a few minutes, the two students go back and forth reading words that contain the featured consonant digraphs, using the chunking and blending technique demonstrated by the teacher when they encounter unfamiliar words. The partners then read a short story together and practice identifying and reading those same consonant digraphs within connected text. After reading, the two students talk about the text they just read, using an anchor chart with question stems to guide their discussion. One question, “What did you notice about the words in the story?” prompts the students to discuss the consonant digraph pattern they identified and return to the text to locate and reread those words.

Ten minutes after the beginning of centers, the teacher asks students to move to the next workstation. The student, his partner, and two other classmates take seats around a kidney-shaped table. The teacher sits in front of them and says, “Let’s review some of the sounds we’ve been working on today.” After a quick refresher, the teacher passes out decodable texts to each student, stating, “You are going to continue reading the book we started yesterday. In this book, there are more words that start with these sounds for you to practice.” The students begin reading to themselves while the teacher helps them with decoding. At the end of the center, the teacher asks questions to help students make connections between decoding, language, and story comprehension. “When I was reading this book with you, I noticed that we read this word a lot,” the teacher says, holding up a card with the word “snow.” “But,” the teacher continues, “the author used the word ‘snow’ in some different ways to help tell us the story. I’m going to show you some sentences, and I want you to think about the meaning of the word ‘snow’ and how it’s used differently in these sentences.” The teacher pulls out several sentence strips. The first says, “Will it snow today?” Another reads, “I hope it snows a lot.” One final strip says, “It snowed ten inches.” Finally, the teacher guides a brief discussion about present and past tense and how students can use inflectional endings to better understand the passage of time within a story.

These two lesson descriptions are based on observations of two Tennessee classrooms. Both lessons were aimed at common consonant digraphs. While the students in the first class spent 30 minutes in activities aligned with the target standard, the students did not actually do what the standard asks: use foundational reading skills to decode and read words in order to support comprehension of texts. In contrast, the students in the second class spent 30 minutes doing exactly what is specified in the standard while the teacher integrated skills- and knowledge-based competencies into instruction—creating students who are *decoders* as well as *thinkers*. ♦

# What Will It Take to Improve?

**Preparation for lifelong reading begins early, and many of the gaps we see in our classrooms take shape long before students enter schoolhouse doors.**

Research points to a number of ways that children’s circumstances and experiences in the first years of life follow them into the classroom, and it also highlights the importance of language-rich practices around very young children that can help pave the way for classroom success.<sup>6</sup> Given the range of out-of-school factors that shape our children’s academic future, changing our state’s trajectory around reading will require collaboration from stakeholders across the state, including community members, parents, and business partners, and improvements in our supports from birth onward.

But we also must place renewed scrutiny on what is taking place in our elementary schools. Why are current practices not having a stronger positive impact on students?

To learn more about the scope of the problem, the Tennessee Department of Education conducted a series of studies designed to understand student and teacher experiences in the elementary grades, including surveys of teachers, administrators, and district central offices, analyses of student and teacher data, and interviews with school Response to Instruction and Intervention (RTI<sup>2</sup>) teams. The department also partnered with researchers from TNTP, sending literacy experts into more than 100 elementary classrooms across the state to learn more about patterns in classroom instruction. The schools that the researchers visited were purposefully chosen to view the full scope of teaching that is taking place. They represented a wide range of school sizes, student demographics, and Tennessee regions. Some had recorded large student gains in ELA over the past several years, while others were struggling to advance their students.<sup>7</sup>

As we took on this work, we were struck first and foremost by the level of focus that we see across schools and districts on improving elementary literacy.

Tennessee districts are increasingly prioritizing early grades reading success. In the current year,

106 districts placed reading as one of their highest priorities.<sup>8</sup> To meet their goals, most districts have created centralized structures to ensure district-wide focus on literacy instruction. In December 2015, the department surveyed directors of schools about district literacy practices. Over 90 percent of Tennessee’s districts participated in the survey, and all but four had a dedicated daily reading block for students in grades K–3. Two-thirds explicitly laid out a structure for use of instructional time during the reading block (for example, specifying parameters such as the time allotted for read-alouds). Similarly, approximately 80 percent of districts hire instructional coaches to support teachers, with the majority of these coaches aimed primarily at improving literacy instruction.<sup>9</sup>

Literacy instruction is also a high priority for teachers and school-level leaders. In recent years, Tennessee teachers have devoted a substantial proportion of their professional development hours toward improving literacy practices. They similarly prioritize student reading needs in intervention choices, slotting students in reading interventions before math interventions. As a recent report from Knox County noted, “reading skills are seen as the gateway to academic success in all of the other subjects,” and school practices reflect that vision.<sup>10</sup>

Across classroom observations, TNTP researchers noted several consistent strengths that speak to

the professionalism of our teaching force and offer evidence that our state has the potential to make significant gains in this area. Teachers placed high value on students' time in their classrooms, with nearly all the teachers using classroom routines that allowed students to quickly transition from one activity to another. In addition, teachers' lessons ensured that students received practice in reading and writing across content areas and were exposed to all kinds of informational and literary texts—which reflect

important shifts demanded by the new Tennessee instructional standards.

In sum, the overall picture that we found across the state is one of shared priorities. Yet every year, despite these efforts, almost half of students make it through third grade without becoming readers. With such an array of resources devoted to improving student reading results, why have we seen such slow progress over the past five years?

## Teachers are spending time on skills, but they are rarely making the leap from decoding to reading.

Across classroom observations, TNTP's literacy team identified a concerning trend that offers a window into some of the reading challenges that our state has faced over the past several years. Across schools and classrooms, teachers are spending considerable time teaching students word recognition skills, but they are far less often helping students connect decoding skills to the act of true reading.

### THE FINDINGS

**At the K–2 level, classroom time in Tennessee tends to be centrally organized around skill-based competencies.** Two-thirds of K–2 lessons observed by researchers at TNTP focused on phonics and other word recognition abilities. Within these lessons, students learned a set of skills that they rarely had the chance to translate into the act of reading—the act of making meaning from text. Most lessons did not provide students with opportunities to use their newly acquired skills in reading or writing, and less than 10 percent included an explicit link to drawing meaning from words.

**K–2 reading lessons are rarely structured to expose students to complex texts and their vocabulary, ideas, and content knowledge.**

Across K–2, the researchers saw very little attention to the critical thinking building blocks that literacy experts consider key to later academic success, with few lessons that required younger students to engage in higher-order thinking. Only one-third of observed K–2 lessons focused on reading comprehension, and students across lessons spent less than 20 percent of their time listening to teacher read-alouds or reading texts themselves.

These findings were backed up by survey responses from Tennessee district leadership. While most K–3 daily literacy blocks range from 90 up to more than 150 minutes, district leaders mostly reported that somewhere between 0 and 30 minutes of this time is getting spent with complex texts, which are the primary vehicle for developing broader knowledge and vocabulary.



**At the 3–5 level, students spend relatively little time reading during school literacy blocks.**

In grades 3–5, TNTP researchers found that students spent very little time actually reading; only 34 percent of student time was spent reading in each lesson, and only just over half the texts that teachers used for their lessons were at an appropriate level of complexity for the grade level. Lessons themselves did not push students to engage with the words on the page. Most questions asked of students focused on recall of information rather than requiring students to return to the text to examine its structure, concepts, ideas, and vocabulary.

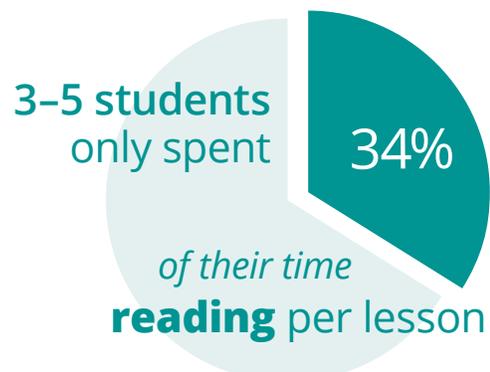
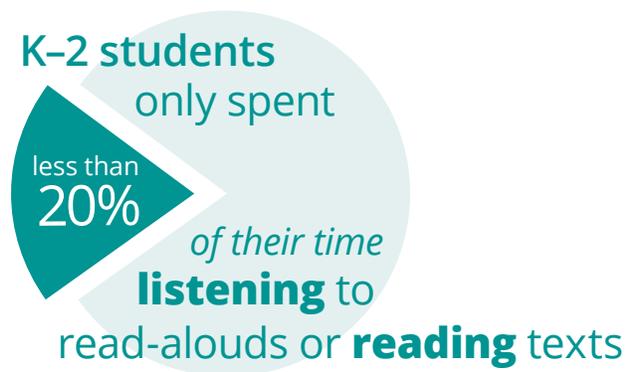
# Almost half of students make it through third grade without becoming readers.

**Most instruction is focused on mastery of individual skills in isolation, rather than on deep comprehension of texts and their content.**

In observed lessons, students were not asked to read and analyze texts with an eye toward understanding their key ideas. Instead, discrete comprehension skills were taught as the end in and of themselves.

peers; without focused instruction, we are unlikely to close the significant gaps that we see across our student population.

One of the most simple but powerful ideas in Tennessee’s new academic standards is that student reading should have a purpose. Reading is an activity



Students’ ability to comprehend texts varies based on the specific qualities of each text, including the vocabulary, structure, syntax, and knowledge demands. Instruction should attend to the specific text at hand, focusing on strategies to understand the complexities of the particular text. This is particularly important for economically disadvantaged students who often have more limited experiences to develop rich vocabulary and contextual knowledge outside of school. These students’ proficiency rates in third grade reading are half those of their non-economically disadvantaged

designed to transfer knowledge—of the world, of others, and of the self—and such transfer is unlikely to occur if reading is taught through disconnected text snippets or isolated skill development. Rather, reading instruction should use rich texts to drive integrated building of skills and knowledge. Students decoding should be combined with opportunities to demonstrate fluency—an initial stage of comprehension—with carefully chosen, meaningful texts. In the recommendations section of this report, we propose a series of steps designed to bring our classrooms closer to this ideal.

## Too many students are getting left behind

Our challenge is not limited to comprehension alone. Our classrooms include substantial populations of students who possess neither decoding skills nor comprehension skills. The disparities we see are often caused by factors outside the school walls—approximately 58 percent of Tennessee’s student population is economically disadvantaged and over two-thirds of students qualify as either economically disadvantaged, Black-Hispanic-Native American, English learners, or students with disabilities. But our analysis also points to several ways that problems compound over time, creating a significant group of students who are currently getting left behind and unable to catch back up.

### THE FINDINGS

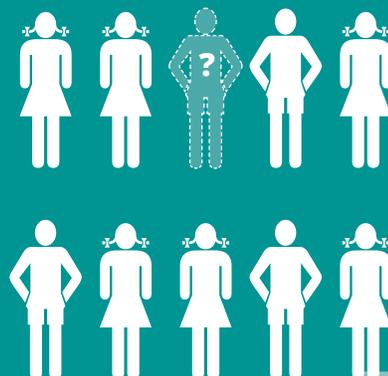
**Ten percent of Tennessee third graders have missed almost half a year of school between kindergarten and third grade.** One out of every ten third graders in Tennessee is absent for approximately one month of the school year. These chronically absent students perform far below their peers, with only around one in four achieving proficiency in ELA. Because absences during one year often predict absences during

the next year, a substantial proportion of our student population faces daunting gaps in instruction. By third grade, our chronically absent students have missed, on average, 80 school days. This amounts to almost half a year of school between kindergarten and third grade. And, although chronic absenteeism is more concentrated in certain schools, over four-fifths of our elementary schools identify at least five percent of their students as chronically absent. Because we know that chronic absenteeism in the early years is associated with poor reading, we must address this issue, bringing more students to school with proactive, not just punitive, measures.

**Early intervention is taking place through RTI<sup>2</sup>, but most schools haven’t moved beyond “checkbox implementation” to a place where RTI<sup>2</sup> meaningfully includes core classroom instruction.** Over the last several years, we have seen a tremendous mobilization of elementary schools across the state to implement systems of Response to Instruction and Intervention (RTI<sup>2</sup>) aimed at addressing gaps in student skills as early as possible. Indeed, by the end of 2015, 78 percent of elementary school

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teachers across the state reported the use of universal screeners, progress monitoring tools, and intervention data teams in their schools. Moreover, teachers have put their support behind this work. Sixty-five percent of elementary school teachers reported that they saw RTI<sup>2</sup> implementation as a positive development for students. However, the experience of implementation is also teaching us a lot about the limits of state mandates in ensuring meaningful student intervention. Even among the schools where implementation appears to have progressed furthest, we see huge differences in the degree to which the lowest performing students are gaining ground. Ultimately, students are best served where the RTI<sup>2</sup> framework is not simply implemented at face value, but paired with strong district knowledge of data analysis, a solid understanding of content standards and skills, and shared ownership of each child's needs.

**Schools that are making the greatest gains through RTI<sup>2</sup> use it as a comprehensive tool for ensuring student success, not just another supplemental support program.** In fall 2015, department researchers spoke with a series of

elementary schools that had fully implemented RTI<sup>2</sup>, focusing on the differences between schools where non-proficient students were making greatest gains and those where gains were small to non-existent. The study demonstrated some of the differences between checkbox implementation versus a more strategic use of RTI<sup>2</sup>. In particular, schools whose non-proficient students were making the greatest gains have distinguished themselves in several ways. They use multiple data sources and constant communication among staff members to guide the RTI<sup>2</sup> decision-making process. They build strong RTI<sup>2</sup> teams with specialized role-players who are well-equipped to support student success. They use all available resources to create staggered, grade-level intervention periods and allocate space for small group work. Finally, they have strong leaders who encourage collective responsibility and engagement and learn from the early stages of RTI<sup>2</sup> implementation to make changes and improve. This type of school-based approach—one that supports the “whole child” and allows for collaborative, subjective judgment and customization—is critical to strengthening RTI<sup>2</sup> implementation and addressing our students' most pressing needs. ♦

## Students need access to highly effective teachers.

Students who had highly effective teachers were **far more likely** to advance to a higher achievement level than students who did not.

Lower achieving students are **significantly less likely** to be placed in the classrooms of our highest rated teachers.



# Recommendations

Improving our results in reading will mean both doing more to keep students from falling behind as they progress through elementary school and becoming more successful at catching students up if they do fall behind. Our recommendations are aimed better supporting teachers to deliver instruction that offers sufficient attention to both skills- and knowledge-based competencies and strengthening school structures that can keep students from slipping through the cracks.

1

## Support deeper literacy instruction to ensure that students learn decoding within the context of broader comprehension.

It is an opportune moment for a statewide initiative aimed at transforming student reading proficiency in the elementary grades. Across districts and schools, we have a number of necessary elements in place designed to prioritize students' instructional needs in reading, including crucial buy-in across all levels of the system.

Now, we need better training and support for teachers across the state so they can successfully help students gain necessary reading skill sets (such as letter recognition, sound blending, and high-frequency word recognition) while immersing students in complex texts and the rich vocabulary and ideas within them, so students can develop an ability to reason and think critically.

This is certainly not a call to stop teaching decoding in the early grades. But, it is a call to ensure that our teachers teach decoding in a contextualized way that lets students apply skills within real texts while also providing students with a multitude of other opportunities to engage with more complex words and ideas than they are necessarily ready to read on their own.

### WHAT WOULD THIS MEAN IN PRACTICE?

In the very early grades (K–2) classrooms, we should see classrooms where skills- and knowledge-based competencies are entwined into coordinated activities. We should still see students practicing the techniques that will eventually allow them to decode the words on a page, but we should see these skills tied to genuine

### Teacher Voice

Other than learning new vocabulary, one of the main problems I see in my students is the ability to connect ideas throughout a text. Think-aloud reading seems to help students connect ideas throughout the text. I practice connecting ideas with students by stopping to ask questions and have them look back in the text to find connections when I feel they need it. Sometimes, graphic organizers showing relationships between characters or events or even ideas are very helpful.

—Robin Schell *ESL Teacher, Knox County*

reading practice. We should also expect an extensive set of activities that reflect the fact that many students in these grades will not have mastered the skills-based competencies associated with decoding and yet they still need to receive as many opportunities as possible to deepen their knowledge, critical thinking, and vocabulary. This means more read-alouds and more opportunities for speaking, listening, and interacting with others about the meaning of language.

Across all grades, we should see a greater focus on the comprehension of a text as a window into the world. In the previous Tennessee reading standards, the goal was often for students to apply a comprehension strategy as an end in itself. Classroom objectives reflected these standards, so teachers would design lessons with the intent that “students will be able to make inferences about characters” or “students will be able to write a one-paragraph summary of a four-paragraph text.” The new expectation, which researchers found to be missing within nearly all classrooms that they observed, is that objectives should be text-based. For example, teachers using the picture book *Thank You Mr. Falker*

by Patricia Polacco, might teach so that “students will be able to describe how the author characterizes Trisha and Mr. Falker, using the character’s description, dialogue, and actions.” For the picture book *Fly Away Home* by Eve Bunting, teachers might set the objective that: “Students will be able to explain how the trapped bird is used as a symbol for the young narrator and how this symbol influences the narrator’s feelings at the end of the story.” For students to master either of the objectives listed above, they need to apply comprehension strategies, such as making inferences or summarizing, but they do this in order to understand the layers of meaning within the text.

## 2

### Increase schools’ and teachers’ ability to differentiate instruction in the early grades and to target students’ academic and non-academic needs as early as possible.

We know that it is never too late for students to catch up. At the same time, research has provided extensive evidence that strong instruction tailored to specific student needs in the early grades plays a major role in allowing students to avoid more extensive remediation later on.

To set students on an early path to success, we must do more to ensure that students across the state are receiving services and instruction aimed at preventing later challenges. This relates in part to our state’s use of Response to Instruction and Intervention (RTI<sup>2</sup>), which we cover in detail in the next recommendation, however it is also more broadly about the way that we use data in the early grades around everything from student needs to teacher assignment to student behavior.

First, while all districts are now using universal screeners as an element of RTI<sup>2</sup>, these screeners focus only on proficiencies in particular skill sets and don’t

offer a broader gauge of student instructional needs across the early grades. In particular, we know little about student readiness upon entry into kindergarten and what this says about the kinds of preparation students are receiving through the many forms of pre-K that exist across the state.

Second, we can take greater steps to ensure that our chronically absent students—and other students whose out-of-school experiences might be encroaching on their in-school opportunities—receive the support they need. Currently, only around half the districts in the state use some form of an early warning data system to flag students whose behavior or attendance patterns suggest that they are on a downward trajectory.

Third, we must find new ways to maximize students’ access to highly effective teachers upon school entry through strategies designed to encourage the purposeful matching of teachers and students.



#### Teacher Voice

I have adapted both my teaching methods and the content to meet the needs of all my students. I use modeling (and lots of it) to teach students the many skills and strategies necessary for success. Small group instruction is critical in my classroom and this allows me to differentiate my instruction.

–Finette Craft *Third grade teacher, Greenville City Schools*



### 3

## Improve RTI<sup>2</sup> implementation for students who need greater support in specific skill areas.

Districts and schools in Tennessee have made enormous efforts over the past several years to change scheduling, staffing structures, and teacher trainings in order to provide students with the RTI<sup>2</sup> program. As with the broader set of literacy initiatives, these efforts have helped to create conditions to spur substantial improvement in student outcomes, but they are not yet sufficient. As Tennessee proceeds with RTI<sup>2</sup> implementation, we recommend several steps to ensure that the state moves beyond “checkbox” implementation so that all students are receiving the interventions they need.

First, educators should fully understand the purpose and use of data collected from universal screeners and progress monitoring tools in order to make intervention decisions that truly support student progress. And, once this understanding is solidified—through training or other methods—school staff cannot look at only these data to determine their students’ needs. Instead, they must use data from multiple sources, including other diagnostic assessments, achievement tests, and teacher observations, to guide the RTI<sup>2</sup> decision-making process. Importantly, school staff also must extend discussions of student progress and its relationship to RTI<sup>2</sup> beyond the data team meetings, with constant

communication between staff members to facilitate an approach that evaluates the “whole child” and supports appropriate, aligned intervention choices.

Second, schools must make an effort to build strong RTI<sup>2</sup> teams with specialized role-players at every position. This means hiring or reassigning certified staff to serve as specialized RTI<sup>2</sup> interventionists who are responsible for delivering Tier II or Tier III interventions. It also requires school leadership to look beyond staff availability in order to create staffing structures that best support student needs. This involves, for instance, actively evaluating personnel strengths and weaknesses to match students with adults who are well-equipped to provide them with the competencies they need to succeed.

Third, schools must adopt an “all in” approach to RTI<sup>2</sup> implementation. This requires strong leadership and an administration that encourages collective responsibility and engagement by giving its staff ownership of the RTI<sup>2</sup> process. This also necessitates an atmosphere in which learning from the early stages of implementation is valued and schools can build individualized approaches to RTI<sup>2</sup> that are both standardized and customizable.



### *Teacher Voice*

I think that preserving independent reading time in my classroom has helped my students grow as readers. Over the past years, I've seen time devoted to sustained silent reading dwindle with the increased focus on intervention and direct instruction. However, I think a healthy approach to reading requires a balance of ALL facets of a reading life: time spent in direct instruction with a mature reader, time spent in practice with challenging texts, and time spent reading self-selected books independently.

Catherine Whitehead *Third grade teacher, Chester County*



Finally, it is important to keep in mind the distinction between interventions and core instruction, which remains the linchpin of the RTI<sup>2</sup> framework.

Recently, the Institute of Education Sciences looked at Response to Intervention programs in elementary schools in 13 states not including Tennessee. In most of the classrooms that the researchers studied, intervention time had supplanted core teaching time, so that students were receiving decreased access to all the vital elements of standards-based instruction even as they were receiving greater practice in particular skill areas. Allowing RTI<sup>2</sup> in Tennessee to function in this

way would directly contradict the first recommendation in this report.

For RTI<sup>2</sup> implementation to be successful, intervention for certain students, including those with special needs, must take place in addition to core instruction rather than acting as a replacement. RTI<sup>2</sup>, used correctly, will serve to enable the kinds of student engagement with text and critical thinking that we call for in the first recommendation by providing alternate moments in the school day to support students who are struggling to successfully master particular isolated skills.

## 4

### Get better at getting better.

Tennessee over the past several years has been remarkably successful at improving student outcomes in most areas. We have seen steady growth in math, science, and social studies scores—accompanied by rising high school graduation rates. Reading remains an area where we are putting in substantial efforts and not seeing corresponding improvement.

The stakes are too high for this to continue to be the case. But changing our course requires more than changing what we do. It requires changing the ways that we learn about and evaluate our efforts so that we can accelerate the pace of progress. We need new research, new knowledge transfer, and new initiatives that allow us to move forward in an area where our current practices are not yet paying off. As Tony Bryk at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching has put it, “We need to get better at getting better.”

Too often, our education reforms lead to the layering of more and more programs upon our already overloaded systems and educators when we would be better served by investing in coordination and alignment. To a great extent, this means creating more effective structures



#### Teacher Voice

I believe we have many experts in Tennessee when it comes to teaching students to be expert readers. I think finding ways for those teachers to share their strategies is important because those strategies could help my students become better readers.



Regina Peery

*Kindergarten teacher, Maury County Schools*

for idea-sharing. Ideally, our continued work to improve reading across the state will be accompanied by new methods for developing insights from local improvement efforts into larger successes that serve the state’s many districts and contexts. ♦

# Department Action Steps

While changing our course in reading will require far more than only state-level action, the Tennessee Department of Education is launching multiple initiatives to respond to the recommendations in the previous section.

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## A Statewide Model of Literacy Coaching

To equip our teachers with the tools and knowledge to make the major shifts in instruction required by Tennessee’s new academic standards, we need to increase their access to deep pedagogical expertise and their opportunities to engage in practical, on-the-ground conversations about daily lessons.

**In the coming months, the Tennessee Department of Education will launch an initiative to staff the eight regions of the state with new Reading Coach Consultants that are focused on receiving and delivering reading training to all district reading coaches.** The district coaches who are selected by the state—in collaboration with districts—to participate in this three-year initiative will receive stipends for serving as district-level designated Read to be Ready Coaches. The reading coach initiative is a three-year intensive approach of ongoing training and support to build educator capacity in our districts to both teach reading (provide exceptional core reading instruction) and to know how to diagnose and intervene when there are reading deficiencies. The focus of the coaching work is building district-level coaches for primarily Pre-K through third grade teachers supported by the state’s regional offices.

**Tennessee’s plan is based on the philosophy that high-quality training from the state coupled with follow-up coaching in schools in partnership with regional expertise and support will result in focus and support that improves reading outcomes across the state.** The goal of the plan is to coach and build capacity for high-quality reading instruction and to support intervention strategies as we continue to refine our RTI<sup>2</sup> work in Tennessee. A focused and on-going training approach to teaching and supporting reading with all teachers who teach in grades PreK–3 will result in high capacity teachers who increase their knowledge of core instruction and intervention strategies. This investment in ongoing training and support for teachers through coaches supports research that shows that the most important in-school factor in a student’s growth is the teacher.

## A Strong Focus on Literacy Instruction among Educator Preparation Programs

The vast majority of new teachers in Tennessee come from Tennessee institutions of higher education and we know we have variation in educator preparation program graduates in terms of effectiveness based on results of the Tennessee Teacher Preparation Report Card. To ensure consistent teacher knowledge of both the skills- and knowledge-based competencies in reading, the Department of Education will conduct several reviews and begin new work in this area.

**Beginning in spring 2016, the department will rewrite the reading standards** for teacher preparation across all K-12 licensure areas and for reading specialists with full alignment to skills- and knowledge-based competencies and the revised Tennessee Academic Standards in English Language Arts.

**The department will review the state’s current reading certification exams** (PRAXIS) for content deficiencies and, if found, seek additional ways to hold candidates accountable for reading content knowledge. The department will also seek approval for a statewide performance assessment for all candidates seeking licensure. This performance assessment must demonstrate that a candidate for any license with elementary grades (PreK–6) has the pedagogical expertise to teach reading along with other content areas that are part of the licensure area.

**The department will work with the state board of education to highlight and broadly communicate teacher preparation outcomes** in English Language Arts on the revised Teacher Preparation Report Card to be released in fall 2016.

**The department will provide statewide reading research, data, and training opportunities to teacher preparation faculty.**

## Consistent Student Screening upon Entry to Kindergarten

A kindergarten entry screener (KES) is a tool to measure children’s preparation and readiness for kindergarten. The department recently collected data on what local districts are already doing with regard to kindergarten readiness assessment. Some districts do not measure readiness for school, and the districts that do measure readiness use a variety of tools of varying quality. Few tools currently in use provide a comprehensive developmental profile across domains. Due to the limited focus of current readiness tools, as well as the inconsistency in use and purpose, it is vital that the state provide a comprehensive tool that provides a profile for every child to inform kindergarten instruction.

**In fall, 2016, Tennessee will pilot a new KES focused on four developmental domains, including social foundations, language and literacy, mathematics, and physical well-being and motor development.** The Tennessee KES is aligned to the Tennessee Early Learning Developmental Standards. KES results will provide a comprehensive developmental profile for every child. This profile enables educators to have valuable information about their students as they plan for instruction to meet the needs of all students. The profile also provides important information regarding the quality of students’ early learning experiences before kindergarten.

## A Second Grade Assessment Aligned to Tennessee Standards in Literacy and Numeracy

It is vital that administrators, parents, and students have specific knowledge of reading strengths and weaknesses during the important early years of school. Currently, our data begins at third grade.

In addition to the KES, the universal screening tools already being used by districts, and local formative assessments, **the department will create a second grade assessment aligned to the Tennessee Academic Standards in English Language Arts/Reading and Math.** The assessment will provide specific information about if the student has mastered reading skills and standards as they exit second grade and enter third grade.

## Portfolio Evaluation for Early Grades Teachers

Developing metrics for measuring student growth in traditionally non-tested grades and subjects remains a priority for the department, and we continue to engage with interested educators and districts to develop rigorous portfolio models of teacher evaluation for State Board of Education consideration.

Last year, the State Board of Education adopted the PreK and Kindergarten portfolio model with eight districts implementing the model this year. During 2015–16, two districts are piloting the new first grade portfolio in preparation for state board approval in order to offer this option to districts for 2016–17. Participating teachers have expressed satisfaction with the portfolio models and report that it treats them as content experts and provides a rigorous and flexible individual growth measure that highlights the impact of the teacher's practices on their own students. This year, kindergarten teachers who are using the portfolio model, reported that for first time ever they have collected student writing samples at the beginning of the year leading them to change instructional practices and formative assessments to reflect their better understanding of student writing proficiency.

Better teacher, school, and district access to resources that meet students' non-academic needs

The department is committed to providing guidance and tools that can help educators support the challenges that the diverse population of Tennessee's students encounters. Central to this strategy is increasing access to the right data in more accessible formats.

**The department is continuing to develop and implement an educator dashboard application/early warning data system that will provide educators with a holistic view of the student.** One area that these dashboards will focus on is the early identification of chronically absent students. While educators will have access to their student data in the dashboard, chronic absenteeism data at the school and district level will continue to be published annually in a downloadable format. The department is partnering with national organizations and districts to develop comprehensive toolkits to address chronic absenteeism in the early grades. Additional strategies and guidance will be developed in the summer of 2016 for schools and districts to coordinate with existing student and family supports—such as family resource centers and healthy school teams—to involve community stakeholders in the development of a comprehensive strategy to reduce chronic absenteeism at all grade levels. Improving student attendance is crucial to ensure that our most historically underserved students are receiving the necessary supports to develop fundamental reading skills. The department is also committed to creating a statewide student advisory group to leverage student and family involvement in the development of comprehensive strategies to support the diverse needs of all students.

## Differentiated District Support Designed to Support Strategic RTI<sup>2</sup> Implementation

The department will provide tiered support to districts, differentiated by grade level (elementary, middle, and high) and by readiness level to ensure implementation aligned to best practice with RTI<sup>2</sup>.

**Through work of the department’s internal RTI<sup>2</sup> task force, professional learning guides and tools will be developed and used within the eight CORE regions.**

Examples include the following: district data teams; survey level assessments; aligning interventions to appropriate skill deficit areas; data based decision-making, and high school implementation. CORE interventionists will facilitate these conversations, discussions, and trainings in each region with support from the task force representatives. Additional guides and tools will continue to be developed.

**In addition to the internal RTI<sup>2</sup> task force, the department will establish the RTI<sup>2</sup> working group to analyze data and research, LEA practices, and current department documents/guidance in order to create refinement guidance for Tier I instruction.** Using the refinement guidance, the department will seek input from various stakeholders to inform the work, develop a communication plan, and create deliverables that will support district implementation of Tier I best practices.

**The internal RTI<sup>2</sup> task force is currently working to revise the RTI<sup>2</sup> Implementation Guide to reflect additional messaging and clarifications.** This document is meant to be “living” – changing as needed to ensure districts have the most up to date information and best practice examples for successful implementation.

## **Collaborative Research with a Practical Focus**

The department is launching two new efforts to enhance the knowledge base about how to improve reading efforts across Tennessee. The first is an experimental effort with the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching to initiate a series of district networks that come together to develop new methods and ideas for statewide reading improvement. The second builds on a previous partnership with Vanderbilt to create a research alliance that will consistently and directly inform state-level policies and practices.

The Carnegie Foundation has led work across the country aimed at helping school systems innovate and improve. **The department’s CORE offices will be working with Carnegie to build a series of “networked improvement communities”** that bring together districts within a region in a disciplined set of improvement protocols designed to identify strategies for improving student reading outcomes. Peers within networks will collaborate to identify and test effective and practical strategies for improving elementary literacy practices that can eventually scale across the state.

For the past several years, the department has collaborated with the Tennessee Consortium on Research, Evaluation and Development (TNCRED) at Vanderbilt on several research projects, including the annual Tennessee Educator Survey. **This partnership is now moving into a new stage of work where we aim to turn this research alliance into a central actor in discussions of state policy by restructuring the organization to focus directly on stakeholder engagement and dissemination of policy-relevant research findings.** The organization’s research agenda will be built from our state’s strategic plan and will focus in part on improving elementary reading. ♦

# Conclusion

Tennessee is not the only state with struggling readers. Decades of work and research across the country have demonstrated that there is no easy fix. But we have also seen substantial improvements in some states and in some communities. The key to these efforts has been a purposeful and long-term engagement with the challenge. Rather than putting their faith in the any single silver bullet, the places that have made large improvements over the past decade have paid careful attention to the systems that already exist and have carefully layered improvements on these efforts to bring about long-term change. ♦

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